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DECENTRALIZED EXECUTION: WILL IT BECOME A LOST ART? (U)

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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18 June 1993

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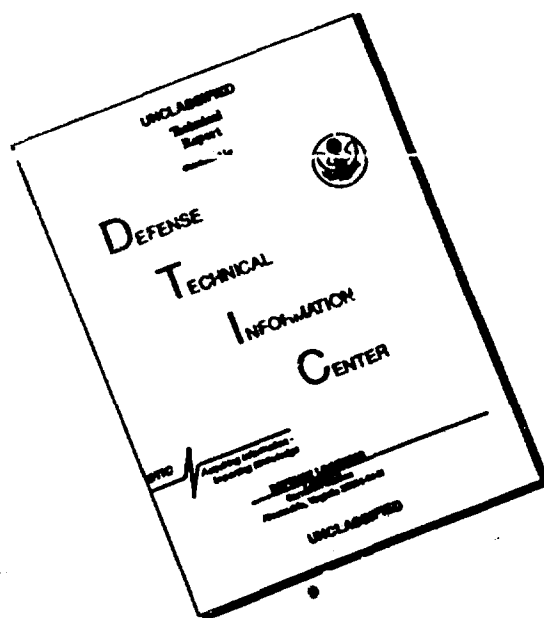


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Abstract of

DECENTRALIZED EXECUTION: WILL IT BECOME A LOST ART?

Decentralized execution, a concept that every service doctrine promotes and warfighters most cherish, is being challenged by mounting external forces that may be making it increasingly difficult to practice this philosophy. The stakes are high, for the implications not only encompass civil-military issues, i.e., political control, but the very professionalism of our military forces. An examination of trends in high technology (command and control issues), military - media relations, the spectrum of conflict, international law, and joint operations illustrates many of the obstacles combatant commanders are having to face. Despite our best efforts, these challenges may soon become overwhelming, and although decentralized execution will not be rendered obsolete, it may become a lost art.

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DECENTRALIZED EXECUTION: NECESSITY OR LUXURY?

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Problem. World events and domestic pressure are not only leading to a restructuring of our armed forces but are forcing us to reconsider our most fundamental beliefs. We are being asked to think creatively about the future. There are no sacred cows. Our goal is to develop a smaller, but more capable force. Down sizing occupies most of our attention and we must consider ways to improve our capability to compensate for the reductions in personnel and depth of our combat power. Concepts, ideas and principles of war, service doctrines, roles and missions, and even the basic philosophies of how we practice our profession are under the microscope.

Current Doctrine. Joint doctrine stipulates that "unity of effort, centralized planning, and decentralized execution" are key principles that joint force commanders must consider as they organize their forces and develop their concepts of operation.¹ "Decentralized execution is essential because no one commander can control the detailed actions of a large number of units or individuals."² Decentralized execution promotes versatility, responsiveness and initiative. It provides fertile ground for that most noble quality that Clausewitz calls boldness. The USMC

Warfighting Doctrine (FMFM-1) establishes decentralized execution as a core philosophy. The 'zero-defects' mentality is out. To create an environment where initiative and boldness are encouraged and rewarded requires tolerance, trust, confidence, and above all, competent leadership. Certainly our most successful operational level commanders have believed in and practiced decentralized execution, but despite the obvious merits, particularly in the chaos and friction of war, it is a concept that often times proves more difficult to practice than imagined, and it may be getting even tougher. .

Traditional service attitudes that centralized control is a detriment to effectiveness and efficiency are being challenged by evidence that centralized command and control of our armed forces may soon become a necessity. Is the military commander under increasing pressure to secure the perfect solution? Will intrusive command and control systems undermine doctrine and leadership? Obstacles to the operational level commander's ability to embrace decentralized execution are emerging from several arenas. Rapid technology growth, our growing preoccupation with the low end of the spectrum of conflict, the military - media relationship, the complexities of international and environmental law, and the ever-increasing political implications of the use of military force are all making decentralized execution more difficult.

CHAPTER II

OUR INSATIABLE QUEST FOR TECHNOLOGICAL SUPERIORITY

"There may be some times when our crisis management communications system breaks down, but there aren't many. Most of the time, the damned thing works too well."³

Anonymous high ranking officer

Technology has redefined modern warfare. It dictates the boundaries, the level of violence, even the ground rules themselves for waging war. Technology has had no greater impact than on our command and control capabilities. Although much of the recent attention focused on command and control systems has centered around interoperability and commonality, the growing dominance and potential consequences of these complex systems poses a serious threat to tactical initiative. Commanders at all levels may soon find it increasingly difficult to allow their warfighters to exercise the independent judgment so necessary to successfully wage war at the tactical level. This challenge has nothing to do with a blatant disregard for our principles of war but is developing from a perceived need for increased information in order to make decisions. Centralized control will become more tempting simply because the capability is there.

The pace of technological innovation is mind boggling. Some would argue that computers would make excellent soldiers if they could stand and salute.⁴ Crisis management systems such as

WWMCCS (Worldwide Military Command and Control System) permit our NCA to communicate directly with on scene commanders. This bypassing of the chain of command, although most blatant during Vietnam, has occurred in nearly every administration. Secretary McNamara attempted to direct naval units during the Cuban Missile Crisis and even wanted to talk directly with the commanding officer on the bridge.⁵ The Reagan administration did stress greater reliance on the judgment of the military, particularly the on-scene commander, as the downing of a Libyan jet in the Gulf of Sidra in 1981 and the Grenada invasion in 1983 exemplify, but even the Reagan White House exercised control of the interception of the Achille Lauro hijackers.⁶ Regardless of the level of trust and confidence that may exist in any particular civil-military relationship, the executive option to exercise some degree of centralized control will continue to be influenced by the potential political consequences of the action.

Theater command and control systems such as Joint-STARS, JTIDS, JINTACCS, and AWACS permit unprecedented coordination and concentration of combat power. We seem to be capable of handling every possible contingency as long as all systems work, but we must remember that all these systems are designed to fight other machines, not men. Are we developing a generation of warfighters and future leaders so reliant on technology that disruption of the information flow may paralyze their ability to carry out missions and make basic decisions? Although commanders will always strive to maximize their knowledge, success is not

possible unless we retain the ability to tolerate and cope with uncertainty, and ultimately make use of it.⁷

Desert Storm validated our investments and belief in technological superiority, but the Iraqi forces did not challenge our capability to wage high tech war. Continued evolution toward more centralized control may eventually lead to battlefield paralysis if enemy action eliminates, or disrupts, our communications, satellites or control nodes. Additionally, budgetary constraints and down sizing may eliminate the system redundancies so important to waging war.

We already possess the capability to inundate the tactical warfighter with more data than he can reasonably assimilate. The operational level commander has the ability, through instantaneous information flow, to control nearly every unit under his command, particularly in the air and on the sea. A common concern for commanders has always been effective two way communications. Although each level of the chain of command seems to prefer minimum guidance from above and maximum information from below, the operational level and tactical commanders have distinct responsibilities to each other in order to thrive in the chaos of war. The operational level commander must first provide a clear understanding of his intentions, followed by any and all information his tactical commander may need to successfully engage the enemy. The tactical commander must keep his chain of command informed. Emphasis on actions taken rather than requests for permission, based on a complete understanding of the concept

of operations will reassure superiors that the situation is well in hand and does not warrant intrusion from above. The combatant commander or joint force commander may have the big picture but the tactician is engaging the enemy.

We must be cautious not to adapt the principles of war to technology. Technology does influence the entire spectrum of warfare, from the causes that lead to war to the very conceptual framework we use to think about war.⁸ Technology presents tremendous implications for the growing capability to exercise centralized control of our armed forces. Will these improved capabilities be used to grant freedom of action to the embarked commanders or will they result in a further erosion of tactical autonomy?⁹

CHAPTER III

INFORMATION WARFARE: THE MILITARY - MEDIA RELATIONSHIP

...If a commander in Desert Shield/Storm sat around in his tent and mused with a few CNN guys and pool guys, it's in 105 capitals a minute later."¹⁰

Gen. Colin Powell

Friend or Foe? The 'Credibility Gap', born out of the fervent distrust and hostilities between the military and the media following Vietnam, has narrowed quite a bit. We seem to be genuinely concerned about accommodating each other's needs. Current efforts, focused on evaluating past complaints and lessons learned, will hopefully ensure a smoother working relationship during future military operations. Much of the debate over complaints centers around the military's traditional concerns for operational security and troop safety. These security and safety concerns may take on even more significance in light of the dramatic strides in technology the press now brings to the battlefield. Despite detailed preparation for the media by the theater commander, round the clock, real time news reporting may impact operational and tactical flexibility.

The root of the historical friction between the military and the media goes a bit beyond security and safety concerns. It's also a matter of image. Commanders are proud of their troops, the troops are proud of their mission and everyone certainly loves good press that praises the skill, courage, strength and

sacrifice of our warriors. But the press also reports blunders, cowardice, weakness and agony.¹¹ War, and all its gruesome violence, can now be watched live, in the living rooms of America. This changes the playing field significantly. Initial perceptions are hard to change, regardless of the accuracy of the information presented. No single factor will influence public opinion more than casualties.

Support for Desert Storm would have been much different had casualties mounted during a lengthy conflict. Quick, well-planned and well executed operations are rapidly becoming the only solution our public will support.¹² Operational level commanders will be under increasing pressure to deliver perfection, and the press teams will be there every step of the way. Tolerance, trust and confidence in subordinates will be tested by exposure of flaws, mistakes and tragedy. Second guessing will likely rise to a new plateau and only the most resolute commanders will be able to remain committed to core philosophies and a well conceived concept of operations.

LICs. Although we remain prepared for potential MRCs in certain regions of the world, we are becoming increasingly preoccupied with the low end of the spectrum of conflict. Low intensity conflict presents its own unique public affairs challenges to the operational level commander. The very reasons for our involvement may be questioned from the beginning, and maintaining public support, particularly during a protracted struggle, will always be difficult. The commander must be able to

articulate the actions of our military in supporting the goals of our nation's foreign policy. As opposed to mid and high intensity conflict, support by the general public during LICs cannot be assumed.¹³ Questioning of U.S. policy leading to the involvement of our military may be exacerbated by the lack of clear military objectives and/or a complicated termination phase. National sovereignty, sensitivity over civilian casualties, and moral issues will all affect the commander, but as the next chapter will explain, the joint force commander will also be challenged by the complexities of international law.

CHAPTER IV

YOUR JAG CORPS OFFICER-DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT HIM

At all times a commander shall observe, and require his command to observe, the principles of international law. Where necessary to fulfillment of this responsibility, a departure from other provisions of Navy Regulations is authorized.

Article 0605, U.S. Navy Regulations, 1973.

Today's operational level commanders, more than ever before, must become experts in, and ensure compliance with, international law in general and the law of armed conflict in particular. Staff judge advocates have become critical advisors to combatant and joint force commanders and both must carefully consider the legal implications of courses of action before making operational decisions. The consequences of violations, particularly in view of instantaneous information technology, can be severe. Careers can be terminated, operations 'judged' a failure, or coalitions ended by the domestic and/or international response to the improper planning and execution of armed conflict. To make matters worse, the rules, customs, principles and interpretations that are imbedded within the spectrum of conflict, rather than black and white, are quite gray. How do you distinguish a terrorist from an insurgent? How do you determine the proper level of force to utilize? Have you taken all possible precautions to minimize civilian casualties? The challenges and restrictions placed upon our military forces in the execution of several recent operations have prompted some to question if the

military is properly suited for what they're being asked to accomplish. Never the less, the military continues to be the organization of choice for any operation that may involve the use of force.

International law best serves the nations who support and promote the principles behind the rules. The unwavering resolve of the UN during Desert Shield, finally resulting in the authorization to use force, legitimized the allied coalition in such a way, that Desert Storm now serves as the 'how to' model for maintaining international law and order. The force multiplier effect can be incredible. Coalition warfare presents unique challenges to the operational level commander because not all nations subscribe to the same conventions, treaties, customs or rules of engagement. For example, the interpretation of, and reaction to, hostile intent has lead to a U.S. policy of not taking the first hit, but this can be at complete odds to an ally whose policy is to always take the first hit. Which nation does the commander place at the front line and how much guidance must he provide?¹⁴ Additionally, the legitimacy and political survival of coalitions may very well be threatened by adherence to, and enforcement of, international law.

DOD directives and service policies are predictably forthright in their requirement that all service members comply with the law of armed conflict. Violations will be investigated. Criminal liabilities may result. Commanders can delegate authority but they can't delegate responsibility. They remain

accountable for any violations of the law of armed conflict, regardless of the fact that they may not have ordered it, authorized it or even knew about it.¹⁵ How much guidance and direction must operational commanders provide? Can they afford to trust the 'common sense' of their tactical warfighters when determining how much force to use? The challenge is to provide the proper direction and restrictions without jeopardizing the survival of your forces or success of the mission. During Operation Just Cause, Gen. Thurman (CINCSOUTH) ordered that the use of indirect fire weapons (artillery, mortars) and aerial strafing and bombing had to be approved by a lieutenant colonel or above. LtGen. Stiner, the JTF South Commander, placed further restrictions on the use of indirect firepower around the city. Additionally, helicopter door gunners could not return small arms fire from city houses or crowds.¹⁶ Stringent rules of engagement such as these are indicative of the tremendous sensitivity placed on minimizing casualties and the dilemma commanders face over decentralized execution.

Another aspect of domestic and international law that commanders must consider involves the environment. World public opinion and the political consequences of environmental disasters resulting from armed conflict necessitate careful reevaluation of not only target selection, but types of weapons used. Monitoring of, and questions concerning, the Desert Storm oil slick quickly became one of the top priorities for the Persian Gulf Battle Force Commander. Environmental law has become a major force.

CHAPTER V

SERVICE AUTONOMY IN THE JOINT ARENA

"When the Navy is talking about joint command and control, they usually mean interoperability between themselves and the Marine Corps."

Frustrated Pentagon Action Officer

Can we shed our baggage? Command has a very personal nature to it. An individual, responsible for the direction, coordination and control of military forces has developed his own style, warfighting philosophies and service loyalties. Along the way, most individuals pick up a fair amount of baggage. Each service has its own perspectives on war and fundamental beliefs in roles and missions. Can a combatant commander, called upon to lead a joint force, be realistically expected to discard those fundamental beliefs/biases as he plans and executes his campaign? The answer, of course, should be yes.

Although we have come a long way under Goldwater/Nichols, the tensions of inter-service rivalry, inherent pressure to succeed and overwhelming complexities of today's warfighting environment will continue to make it increasingly difficult for combatant commanders to avoid giving in to the influence of their baggage as opposed to viewing the situation from an unbiased joint perspective. Short notice, crisis response, contingency operations present an even greater challenge as the assembled forces may not have trained together to any great extent, thereby

forcing a reliance on individual service doctrine and strategy. Only training can provide the exposure to capabilities and accompanying familiarity combatant commanders need to confidently practice decentralized execution, i.e., to allow forces to perform as they are trained to fight. Without it, personal beliefs and biases will be hard to shake. VADM Metcalf, task force commander during the Grenada rescue operation in 1983, pointed out that when forces were not permitted to 'capitalize on inherent strengths', things did not go too well. The Rangers, trained to operate at night, were inserted in daylight, and this violation of doctrine nearly jeopardized the success of the operation.¹⁸

Disassociated Execution. Service components within a joint command must be as knowledgeable and receptive as the commander himself to the capabilities each unit brings to the force. Parochialism and ignorance within a joint command can result in disassociated vice decentralized execution. The synergy of joint combat power will be sacrificed as each component operates independently, without effective and informed coordination from above. The combatant commander must be able to recognize these tendencies, set the example and demand cooperation, yet allow the distinct personalities of each to thrive. Coalition warfare presents similar challenges, only on a grander scale, due to the added complexity and diversity of capabilities. Additionally, service bias may be replaced by nation bias.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

"Happy the army where ill-timed boldness occurs frequently; it is a luxuriant weed, but indicates the richness of the soil."

Clausewitz

Initiative and boldness are traits we promote and most admire in our armed forces. Without them we would have far fewer heroes. Traits such as these are the source of our fighting spirit. Warfighters want to believe, perhaps more importantly, need to believe, that their judgment and independent actions can make a difference, and will be supported by their chain of command. What decentralized execution must never become, though, is an excuse for rashness or blatant disregard of orders or doctrine. In wars past, decentralized execution was more of a necessity. Tomorrow, it might become an expensive luxury. The uncertainty and friction of war is being replaced by the chaos of information management. In our quest for solutions, we seem to be raising just as many questions.

Modern warfare presents unique challenges to today's combatant commander. Our willingness to continue to embrace decentralized execution will be tested. Our ability to develop independent judgment in each generation of warfighters will depend on leadership, training, and an examination of our system

of accountability and rewards.

The warfighting philosophies of an organization are usually a direct reflection of the personality and leadership style of the commander. Modern warfare will not change that. What might change is the combatant commander's reliance on core concepts and ideas. Tolerance and flexibility may yield to centralized control and restrictive rules of engagement. To prevent this we must train differently. Looking good on paper, referred to by some as 'administrative warfare', is misleading, and sends the wrong signal to subordinates. How much do we learn from canned exercises where everything goes perfectly? Do we reward tactical innovation and initiative or do we reward units that manage to get through the 'cycle' without something going wrong? More can be learned from failure than success, for too often success is mistakenly attributed to everyone doing their job well, when it might have been just plain luck. We must stop trying to manage uncertainty during training, for this very uncertainty may prove disastrous during conflict.

Only competent leadership at all levels, confidence, trust and a tolerance for mistakes can enable decentralized execution to flourish. The challenges on the horizon appear formidable and their potential impact remains unclear. Even without these challenges, this most cherished philosophy has always been tougher than it sounds.

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